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Editorial staff opinion

Opinion

Park a sinkhole for taxpayer dollars

Two weeks ago, the Oswegoland Park District Board heard from yet another governmental agency on the subject of Saa-Wee-Kee Park.

In the past several months, several governmental agencies (including a few we've never heard of) have weighed in on Saa-Wee-Kee and whether hazardous wastes are or are not located in the park situated off Sundown Lane along the banks of the Fox River.

Thus far, about the only hazardous items found in the park--and ordered removed--were 59 ancient barrels with dried paint residue containing higher than allowable levels of lead.

But even more governmental agencies are now getting into the act, the latest being the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). A recent ATSDR study of the park found numerous buried metal objects (not surprising for an area that was once a working gravel mine and later the town dump). The report said the buried items could be more drums, which could contain hazardous wastes, which could create a dangerous health situation for residents living near the park.

Although the report also reported syringes were among medical debris visible in the park, that claim was publicly recanted by an ATSDR official. Other medical debris--old vials with liquid residues--were said by the official not to be dangerous. The danger lay in being poked by the syringes, which are apparently not there. They MIGHT be there, though, the official suggested, lurking under the ground.

According to the ATSDR, the Saa-Wee-Kee canoe landing already installed is in a safe area, so residents can still use that needed facility. But given the never-ending involvement by so many governmental agencies, who now issue warnings about substances and objects that MIGHT be found at Saa-Wee-Kee, we think it's time the park district decide whether it's worth spending any more tax dollars on attempting to make the rest of Saa-Wee-Kee useable.

Perhaps it might be wiser for the park district to "warehouse" the park property by fencing it off and placing highly visible signs that the fenced area might be contaminated with hazardous wastes.

We think the park district should continue to sample private water wells as recommended by the ATSDR to assure the safety of those living near the park, but we also think the ATSDR should revise the written public record concerning the presence of "stealth" syringes on the surface in the park.

Other than those actions, we think the park district's scarce development funds can find much better uses than paying legal and other fees the continuing Saa-Wee-Kee saga is costing taxpayers, who find themselves financing both sides of this dispute.

by Roger Matile
editor

